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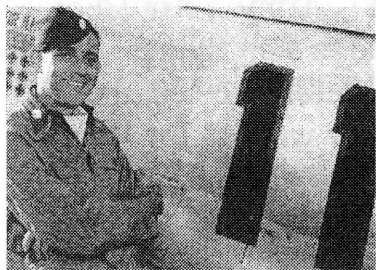
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Herky Green

by
Berry Craig

MAYFIELD, Ky. -- Col. Herschel H. "Herky" Green shot down a half dozen enemy airplanes on just one mission in World War II.

He was piloting a borrowed plane and didn't know he had more ammunition. Otherwise, he might have notched a higher tally.



Even so, Green's flying feat has few parallels in the history of air combat. It is even chiseled in stone.

"ON 30

JANUARY 1944 COLONEL GREEN SHOT DOWN 6 AIRCRAFT IN ONE DAY," says the hero's shiny black granite monument on the Graves County courthouse lawn in Mayfield, his hometown. Green, 83, is retired in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif.

Green shot down 18 Axis aircraft in 1943-1944. He was one of the few Army Air Force pilots who were aces in two different fighters, the P-47 "Thunderbolt" and the P-51 "Mustang."

Green, who also flew a P-40 "Warhawk," won promotions and a chestful of decorations. He

earned the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, 26 Air Medals, a Purple Heart, the Joint Services Commendation Medal and the French Croix de Guerre with Palm.

Green ended up commanding his outfit, the 317th Fighter Squadron of the 325th Fighter Group, dubbed the "Checkertails" because of bright yellow and black checkerboards painted on their planes' tails. The western Kentuckian was the top U.S. ace in the Mediterranean Theater when he was promoted to 15th Army Air Force headquarters in 1944 and had to stop flying.

Green made colonel before he left the Air Force in 1964. Afterwards, he worked for Hughes Aircraft in California for 18 years.

Green's monument is a local landmark. In 1992, former Mayor John Boyd led a fund drive to get it built in honor of Green, who played trumpet in the band at Mayfield High School, where he graduated in 1937.

Green went to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, but left school for the Army Air Force. The Graves countian earned silver pilot's wings and gold second lieutenant's bars before he went overseas.

The famous air ace was all but forgotten in Mayfield, according to Boyd, a World War II Army Air Force veteran and ex-prisoner of war. "Here we had this hero who shot down 18 aircraft

and got every medal you could think of except the Congressional Medal of Honor," Boyd said. "But a lot of people in Mayfield didn't even know who he was."

After the monument came state recognition for Green. In 2001, he was inducted into the Kentucky Aviation Hall of Fame in Lexington.

Green mostly flew from air bases in North Africa and Italy. He logged 100 combat missions, none more fateful than the one on Jan. 30, 1944.

Green's P-47 fighter was grounded for repairs. So he flew another P-47 in an attack on German airfields around Villaorba and Udine, Italy.

Green spotted four lumbering Junkers-52 triple-engine transports lined up, apparently for landing. Green got behind the trailing German plane and shot it down. "I switched to the next plane, got off a quick burst setting it afire, and then switched to another, followed by a fourth, all with the same fatal results," he wrote in his autobiography, *Herky! The Memoirs of a Checkertail Ace*.

Seeking other targets, Green pounced on an Italian Macchi 202 fighter and destroyed it. (Italy, which had sided with Germany, pulled out of the war in 1943. While some Italians joined the Allies, others kept fighting in support of the Germans.)

Green's last kill was a German Dornier-217 twin-engine bomber. He set it on fire and watched it crash.

As he blasted the Nazi warplane, Green spied tracer rounds streaking from his eight, wing-mounted .50-caliber machine guns, a sign he was running out of ammunition. So he headed for home.

Green thought he had 400 rounds of ammo for each gun. He really had twice that amount.

The P-47 could haul 800 rounds per gun, Green explained. "Most of us, however, carried only 400 rounds...because we felt the weight reduction significantly improved aircraft performance," he wrote.

As a warning to pilots, 317th Squadron armorers would slip five tracer rounds onto the 400-round ammunition belt when there were 50 shots left, Green said.

Unknown to Green, the pilot whose plane he used flew with 800 rounds per gun.

The other pilot's armorer would snap two 400-round belts together, Green explained. "This meant that five tracers were fired just before the end of the first 400 rounds, as well as the second 400 rounds."

Had Green realized he had the extra firepower, he might have downed even more enemy aircraft on what was still his most productive mission.

Green wrote that he was thinking about Mayfield in his first dogfight, May 19, 1943. It looked like his last air combat.

Before he downed one enemy Messerschmitt 109, Green shook off two more, but went into a spin in his bullet-riddled P-40 and almost crashed. Green nursed the crippled plane back to his base where the fighter was junked.

"I knew that death was sitting in the cockpit with me," Green wrote. "....There was no time for my life to pass before my eyes, but I did have time to wonder how in the world a small-town, country boy like me had gotten himself into such a mess."